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THE
BATTLE OF CEDAR CREEK

OCTOBER 19, 1864

*A Paper read before the Massachusetts Military Historical
Society, December 8, 1879*

BY
COL. B. W. CROWNINSHIELD



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CEDAR CREEK.

THIS battle was the last of the war for the possession of the Shenandoah Valley. During the four years from 1861 to 1865, each year brought its Shenandoah Valley campaign, and some years there were several. What happened in 1864 is a fair illustration of the activity of these four years' campaigns, for all were lively: the advance of Hunter to Lynchburg (which he failed to capture) in June; his retreat, chased by Early up to the fortifications of Washington, in July; the pursuit of Early via Snicker's Gap by the Sixth Corps; Early's raid across the Potomac and burning of Chambersburg in retaliation for Hunter's destruction of dwelling-houses. Then, on Sheridan's taking command of the Middle Military Division (which included the valley) in August, Early was pushed back to Fisher's Hill; when, on being reinforced by Anderson's division of Longstreet's corps and by Fitzhugh Lee's division of cavalry, which came up by way of Chester Gap and Front Royal, he pushed Sheridan back to Halltown, near Harper's Ferry, only in turn to be driven back to Winchester. September 19th the battle of Winchester sent Early in haste to Fisher's Hill, from which position, three

days afterwards, he was pursued in complete rout to Waynesboro and Staunton. Sheridan desolated the upper part of the valley and retired to Cedar Creek in October (and on the way the cavalry had a fight, in which Rosser was pursued twenty-eight miles up to Mount Jackson). Then came the battle of Cedar Creek, after which, as far as the main body of the army was concerned, except a few reconnaissances, came a quiet, not broken until February, when, on Sheridan's march to join Grant, the balance of Early's command was captured, and the valley became peaceful, only because for the rebels almost nobody was left to fight but Jubal himself. But he, with his strange activity, betook himself across the mountains of the Blue Ridge, and organized himself into an independent cavalry command, which a few days afterward was run into and dispersed; upon which the "bad old man" (as General Lee is said to have called him) was relieved from command by Lee, and retired to Lynchburg, being succeeded by Echols.

What was there peculiar in the valley that it should afford such a continuous theatre for action? Many things. Looking at the map of the Southern States, you will notice that from the Potomac River to Atlanta, Georgia, there is only one avenue, one means of communication, one pass from west to east, that, namely, from Kentucky and Tennessee (whose two roads unite at Knoxville) to Virginia by the line of road called the Virginia and Tennessee Air Line. This line runs through a country between Knoxville and Richmond, never visited by our troops, — a rich country, with rich valleys branching out from it. Wa-

tered by the James and its branches, and supplied with railroad and canal, abounding in coal and iron and wheat and forage, it was the natural source of supply for Lee's army. At Lynchburg were arsenals and foundries and manufactories, which supplied Lee with clothing and arms; and Lynchburg in the north was to the rebel armies what Atlanta was in the south. Connecting with this valley from the north was the Shenandoah Valley, full of grain and forage, and largely populated by a curious people of German origin, the Dunkards and Mennonites, who like the Quakers were non-resistants, and during all the war had managed to be non-combatants. They tilled the land and raised crops, which became, in the general neglect of such things in the South on account of the war, constantly more necessary to Lee's army. Each year about the time the crops ripened a rebel force went down the valley to secure and harvest them.

But apart from this the valley had other values. Towards the east numerous gaps opened from the valley to Eastern Virginia, with a system of roads leading towards Richmond, and through Rockfish Gap was a railroad to Staunton from the main line running north from Richmond. The valley itself had three railroads. The Baltimore and Ohio, across the lower part, near to and parallel with the Potomac, connected Baltimore and Washington with the West. This road is one of the largest corporations in the United States, and during the war was of the greatest use in bringing troops and supplies from the West. It was frequently raided upon by the rebels, and at times rendered useless by the destruction of the

iron bridge at Harper's Ferry, and other bridges. Though useful, it was not a necessity to us, as there were several other lines of railroad further north which connected the East with the West. A branch road connected Harper's Ferry with Winchester, and another Alexandria, via Manassas Gap, with Front Royal, and thence up the main valley to Mount Jackson. The latter was never of much use to the rebels, as it did not connect with their railroad system.

But the great feature in the way of transportation was the valley pike, a well-graded, well-drained, and macadamized broad road, leading from Martinsburg on the line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, via Winchester, Strasburg, etc., to Staunton. This road had good feeders (several macadamized) running through the gaps into Eastern Virginia and all south of Front Royal towards Richmond. By the valley pike an army, in all weathers and seasons of the year, could march at great speed, and except in very wet seasons in many parallel columns, with baggage and artillery up. This was always the chosen route for the rebel armies to march by to invade Pennsylvania and Maryland. No large bridges spanned the rivers and creeks it crossed, so that it was always ready for the march of troops and trains.

The valley, being so well cultivated, was an open country generally, admirably adapted for fighting, with large fields, and woods pretty clear of underbrush. Troops, in good weather, could march in any direction, independent of roads, and the streams were fordable every few miles, even the Shenandoah itself. As the principal idea of all the Virginia campaigns was to

cover Washington securely, in the first place, and as the valley was the high road thereto, in the earlier campaigns attempts were made to fortify the valley and interrupt the pike, the "race-track of armies," as one writer has aptly called it, by earth-works and forts at important points. At Strasburg is an earth-work called Fort Banks; at Winchester are several detached forts on the hills, erected by Milroy. All the fortification, however, served only to supply the rebels, who in their invasions of the valley never, until in Sheridan's time, failed to defeat our armies, with guns of position as well as field-pieces, as attempts at permanent occupation gave them larger dépôts of supplies to capture. It really seemed as if there were something fatal to our arms and uncanny in the valley.

Whenever our armies advanced beyond Winchester, their left flank became exposed to any force Lee chose to detach from his army in Eastern Virginia and send through the gaps into the valley, and the roads were so good that Jackson's "foot cavalry," as they got to be called, generally effected a surprise on our troops. It was this corps that was always detached, and their success was so uniform that they might be pardoned for thinking themselves invincible when in that part of Virginia. The cavalry of Lee's army was largely recruited there, and was generally sent there to winter, so that every trooper was perfectly familiar with all the roads. Admirable roads facilitated quick marches, and the advance of our troops south, of the rebels north, in the valley, necessitated always a counter movement by the threatened party.

We find, then, Early at Fisher's Hill October 13th, to which place he followed, after Sheridan's retreat from Staunton, with an army which, though lately twice defeated with great loss of men and guns, was yet composed entirely of veteran soldiers, to whom all the battles of the valley were household words and names in which until Sheridan's advent they could take pride. His cavalry had in great part had its success there also under Ashby in the beginning of the war. The last year had been for his cavalry a cruel season. They had been defeated almost uniformly. Their leader had been changed, but Rosser, "the saviour of the valley," as some of his own people called him in anticipation when on his way to the front, was now shorn of guns, glory, and saviourship.

Singularly enough Sheridan's army contained many troops who had had unfortunate experience in the valley fighting the very men who now stood opposite. Part of the Nineteenth Corps was in Banks's army in the valley in 1862, while the third division, Sixth Corps, were Milroy's old men, and had helped build the forts by Winchester.

To Early and his men, then, the valley was a scene of former glory, as it was to many of our men of loss and disgrace. To most of our generals it was new ground.

When Sheridan withdrew down the valley to the position of Cedar Creek, he had been followed cautiously by all Early's army except the valiant Rosser, and he had good reason to regret his temerity. It certainly was not presumptuous to imagine that Early had had his bellyful of fighting, and would now con-

tent himself with watching Sheridan. He took up the old lines of Fisher's Hill, sending his cavalry out on his left to the crossing at Cedar Creek to watch the back road, and a small force to his right. Between Cedar Creek and Fisher's Hill is Strasburg on the Shenandoah River, and between there and the North Mountain is a hilly country tolerably well wooded. The valley is here about four miles wide, and this debatable ground between the armies was open to frequent reconnaissances from each side.

Sheridan himself went to Washington, October 15th, to meet Secretary of War Stanton and General Augur, to consult about the plan of fortifying the valley at or near Front Royal submitted by General Halleck; and the cavalry which was at Front Royal ready to start on a raid was sent back by him to the army at Cedar Creek, under General Wright, senior officer in temporary command, in consequence of an intercepted dispatch taken down and deciphered by our signal officers from the rebel signal station on Massanutten Mountain. This dispatch was as follows:—

TO LIEUTENANT-GENERAL EARLY:

Be ready to move as soon as my forces join you, and we will crush Sheridan.

LONGSTREET, *Lieutenant-General*.

Anderson's division of Longstreet's corps had come up August 15th from Lee, had gone back September 17th, just before Winchester, and now returned. It contained four brigades, and one battalion of artillery, probably fourteen guns. This gave Early five divisions of infantry and two divisions and one brigade

of cavalry, while Sheridan had eight divisions of infantry and three of cavalry. A large force was always used to guard dépôts and trains, which correspondingly weakened the force at the front.

Sheridan cautioned Wright, on sending back the cavalry, in the following words:—

HEADQUARTERS MIDDLE MILITARY DIVISION, }
FRONT ROYAL, October 16, 1861. }

GENERAL, — The cavalry is all ordered back to you ; make your position strong. If Longstreet's dispatch is true, he is under the impression we have largely detached. I will go over to Augur and may get additional news.

Close up Colonel Powell, who will be at this point.

If the enemy should make an advance, I know you will defeat him. Look well to your ground and be well prepared. Get up everything that can be spared. I will bring up all I can, and will be up on Tuesday,¹ if not sooner.

P. H. SHERIDAN, *Major-General*.

MAJOR-GENERAL H. G. WRIGHT,
Commanding Sixth Corps.

Besides the intercepted dispatches, we drew from prisoners that some move was contemplated. I was at that time Provost Marshal General of the department and army, and it was my duty to interrogate prisoners ; also to manage the spies, of whom we had thirteen at headquarters. These were all but two enlisted men, who chose to take their lives in their hands and go out and seek information. They wore rebel uniform, and would go out each day under instructions from headquarters. On the 16th and 17th they went over to try and capture the rebel vedettes

¹ The 16th was Sunday. The battle was fought October 19th, Wednesday.

at the back road crossing, and each day succeeded in bringing in, not cavalry, but North Carolina infantry soldiers, who said that they had been carried to the crossing behind the cavalry soldiers, about a brigade in number.¹

Of the position our army occupied at Cedar Creek it is perhaps enough to say that in front, facing south, it was bordered by Cedar Creek, — a stream at that time fordable everywhere, but running in a narrow channel with steep banks, which rose almost abruptly all along the front and for a long way to the right. Meadow Creek, a little brook, ran into Cedar Creek, about three fourths of a mile from where the pike crossed on a bridge, and separated the camp of the Nineteenth Corps from the Sixth Corps. The latter came into camp after the rest of the army, having been recalled from White Post, while on their way to Washington and Grant's army after the rest of the army had gone into camp, and had pitched their tents in pretty compact order, just across Meadow Creek, and withdrawn a little to the rear from the Nineteenth Corps line, which extended from the mouth of Meadow Creek to the pike bridge. The Nineteenth Corps camp lay on a plain, sloping down from the pike and from the line of Cedar Creek, towards Meadow Creek. This ridge, one hundred and forty feet above the level of the creek, and very steep towards it, was crowned with part of the Nineteenth Corps artillery, pointing south and west across Cedar Creek, and protected by slight earth-works. To the

¹ Early says they went to surprise our cavalry there, and succeeded in taking a picket post.

rear this plain rose again gradually up to Bellegrove House (or the Hite House), where were General Sheridan's headquarters, and also General Crook's. Crook's corps were all across the pike; the second division and Kitchen's provisional division on a barren hill that overlooked all the plain, in which were the Nineteenth Corps, Sixth Corps, and headquarters. The hill also looked away to the left and left front, and on across the Shenandoah River, into which Cedar Creek empties in front of and a little to the left of Crook's corps. His first division was encamped on a knoll directly south of the other division and in plain sight of it, though separated by a ravine, and beyond, in front and to the left, were woods. This knoll is beyond the general line of the Cedar Creek position and makes a sort of bastion to it, and the men had constructed some little intrenchments here. The pickets of this corps were thrown out to the river and connected with the cavalry pickets, which guarded the river, and whose reserve was two miles away on the road from Middletown to Front Royal.

When General Sheridan put his army into camp at Cedar Creek, he placed Merritt's division of cavalry out to the left of Crook's corps on the road running to Front Royal, and at the place where this road is joined by the road running to the fords of the Shenandoah and Cedar Creek in front of Crook. Powell was also sent out to Front Royal, making all this country to the left secure. General Wright put the cavalry on his right, all of it but Powell, whom Sheridan in his dispatch ordered him to draw in close. The rebel divisions of Gordon, Ramseur, Pegram,

and Payne's cavalry were actually formed for the attack in the field next where Merritt's cavalry had been encamped October 14th.

It happened that no supply train was up at the time, and the army was not incumbered with its usual transportation, but the plain (a pretty level one) was dotted with ambulances and ammunition wagons in places. This was the situation in our army. All we knew of Early was that he was at Fisher's Hill. But he knew a great deal more about our force and position than we did ourselves, and apparently saw through our weakness, while we were conscious only of our strength. It is rather singular how often a very strong position has proved an element of disaster. The strongest places have been captured, and generally by surprise.

Massanutten Mountain extends abruptly beyond the line of Fisher's Hill, and a little beyond Strasburg, north. It has three tops, and is sometimes called Three Top Mountain. Its sides are densely wooded nearly down to the river. On the extreme northern end of the mountain was the rebel signal station, looking directly down into our camps. Everything must have been distinctly visible, and the position of every regiment and each picket post and vedette clearly seen. The want of cavalry on the left rendered that flank much exposed, and at the mercy of an enemy who could once place himself in position there across the river and creek. How to get there was the difficulty. To surmount this and to leave no room for doubt, General Early, in his "Last Year of the War," tells us that two of his division

generals went up to the signal station, and there made their plan of the battle with the real map and the real enemy spread out beneath them. Surely never before was battle so carefully and definitely planned. General Gordon, to whom the task was given, with the greater part of the infantry, unimpeded by artillery or wagons, to make the attack and surprise the Eighth Corps in their beds, told off each detail of the plan to his generals afterwards at Early's headquarters, and left nothing to be explained by dispatches and aids. So much for the making of the plan. The design itself was simple enough. Gordon to take his own, Ramseur's, and Pegram's divisions round through the woods along the base of Massanutten Mountain, and to cross by two fords the Shenandoah, rush upon Crook's men before daylight, and capture or disperse all who were not killed in the attack. The 18th was a superb specimen of an autumn day, warm in the sun, clear and still. As soon as the sun was well down, Gordon commenced his march. The men took nothing but arms and ammunition with them; even their canteens were left, because likely to make a noise and discover the march. Through woods by paths known only to the natives, this wonderful march would have been impossible to any but men used to the country, and confident in their officers and their luck. Five o'clock, October 19th, found all the expeditionary troops in their places, ready for the attack. The sun rose at about 6.15. Kershaw¹ was in his place, and Early himself, with all the artillery

¹ Kershaw was added to the attacking force by Early, and joined him by marching through Strasburg and crossing Cedar Creek near its mouth.

of his army and Wharton's division, was on the crest of the hill beyond Cedar Creek, ready to go forward by the pike at the sound of Gordon's attack. Early's cavalry, on his left, was ready to chime in at the proper moment and make a diversion in his favor. This was the position of the rebel army at five A. M., October 19th. In Sheridan's army we know how the troops were posted. Five o'clock found the army under the command of Major-General H. G. Wright, of the Sixth Corps, who was not at army headquarters, but at the headquarters of the Sixth Corps, across Meadow Creek,—the extreme right of the infantry line. A part of Sheridan's staff, including its chief and several of Sheridan's most trusted aids, was away with him. General Crook, the commander of the Eighth Corps, just about to be attacked, was at his headquarters at Bellegrove House, a quarter of a mile from the nearest part of his command. His troops were all asleep in their tents. General Emory had headquarters among his troops, and he had always made it the custom to turn out his command under arms at reveille. This morning the second division and one brigade of the first division, Nineteenth Corps, were to have made a reconnaissance, and were awakened before daylight, and were cooking their breakfast, as it happened, when the attack was made. Besides an admirable plan of march and attack, admirably executed, the rebels were assisted by a dense fog, which only cleared away an hour after sunrise.

The first firing occurred while it was yet dark,—a sharp ringing volley away to the left; so at least it appeared to be to the staff at Bellegrove House. Those

on the right say that the first attack came from the rebel cavalry away to our right. Probably the attack was simultaneous. It was known to all the generals that a reconnaissance in force would be made, and the cavalry, hearing the guns, thought for some time the firing was from that, and were not at first alarmed. We all turned out in haste and alarm, but after waiting full ten minutes and hearing nothing more, we all turned in again, to be almost immediately routed out by repeated and louder volleys of musketry, this time unmistakably over by Crook's corps camp. Day was now dawning but in the fog everything was quite obscure. An officer came galloping up to Crook's headquarters, and that general and his staff dashed off in the direction of the attack. Almost immediately General Wright and staff came up on horseback, greatly excited and utterly ignorant of what had happened. In the obscurity and confusion nobody could enlighten him accurately; indeed, nobody knew exactly what had happened further than that the firing came nearer each minute.

The first firing was Kershaw's attack on the advanced division of Crook, and was delivered on three sides at once. This division offered almost no resistance, but fled wildly, deserting their camp and its contents, including seven guns, almost without firing a gun.¹ Kershaw's division was enabled by the woods to approach close to the camp before alarming it, but Gordon's other divisions, after crossing, had to

¹ The enemy came on without throwing out any advanced guards and followed the advanced pickets immediately, coming into the camp close upon their heels.

advance quite a distance before delivering their attack, which was the second firing heard. They were, however, not seen until close at hand, on account of the fog. The alarm had been given by Kershaw's attack on the first division, and this gave the second division an opportunity to make some resistance. Gordon's line advanced from the east and took them in flank, for they looked for an attack from the direction of their other division, which was now pouring wildly by and through their camp. The second division had no breastworks or intrenchments, and, surprised and attacked in flank by so formidable a force, it offered but slight resistance. Some of its artillery managed to get away, but none was used against the enemy. Simultaneously with Gordon's attack Early pushed down with Wharton's division, and opening with some of his guns on the works in front of the Nineteenth Corps pushed the others down by the pike to the bridge, and, on Gordon and Kershaw coming up abreast this position and clearing the way, Wharton's division and all the artillery crossed to our side of Cedar Creek. But before this was accomplished the second division, Nineteenth Corps, and one brigade of the first division, which had expected to go on the reconnaissance, formed to resist the enemy, the odd brigade going across the pike to the assistance of the Eighth Corps, and the division taking up its position on the high ridge facing south. The brigade was speedily driven back towards its camp and the division received a fire on its front from Wharton and the rebel guns in front, and a fire of all arms in left flank and rear, from the advancing divisions of

Gordon's men. All this time the fog was very dense, and this added immensely to the confusion and difficulty of comprehending the true situation. Some of our troops took bodies of rebels to be their own men, and only found out their error by being fired upon. The Eighth Corps took no further part as a corps in the doings of the day, but fled in the direction of Winchester.¹ They were joined by great numbers from the Nineteenth and Sixth Corps also, though both the latter kept their organization. Before the Nineteenth Corps extricated itself from its peculiar position some parts of it became heavily engaged, notably one regiment, the one hundred and fourteenth New York, which was put in to hold the enemy long enough to enable the second division to march by them to the rear. This regiment lost in a few minutes nearly half its number, killed and wounded. The Nineteenth Corps finally arrived across Meadow Creek in considerable confusion, and with greatly reduced numbers, and proceeded to form line to resist the enemy's advance upon our extreme right.

The Sixth Corps, under command of General Ricketts, was the only part of the infantry not under the enemy's fire at the first attack. Some regiments were somewhat demoralized by the stream of fugitives from the Nineteenth Corps, running to the rear through their camps, and they contributed somewhat to that body themselves, especially the third division. But Ricketts soon had his men in motion towards the

¹ General Crook worked hard, and, by the time of the last attack, had succeeded in reorganizing a part of his command in rear of Merritt's cavalry. They took some part in the final charge at four P. M.

enemy marching on his side of Meadow Creek, and with the second division he took a position on a knoll, wooded in parts, and faced southeast towards the Eighth Corps camp with artillery, and advanced from this position a little toward Middletown into the valley. Here he fought Gordon's, Wharton's, Ramseur's, and Pegram's divisions, which were posted on high ground close by the pike and to the westward of it, facing northwest; bringing his other divisions up to support the second. This prompt arrival of the fresh troops of the Sixth Corps checked Early's success, repulsed the attack of his divisions, and put him for a time on the defensive. It caused him to change his line of battle, and was the first successful resistance of the day to his attack. Getty's fine division made a brilliant fight of it, and was seconded by the other two divisions. Early's change in his line necessitated a change in the position of the Sixth Corps, and Getty's division was drawn back a little to the crest of the hill in their rear. This was the turning point in Early's attack, and but for this the final success could not have been possible, for it gave a breathing spell, most necessary, to our disorganized troops. Meanwhile, Kershaw moved across the pike to and beyond Bellegrove House and formed the extreme left of Early's line, operating against the Nineteenth Corps, being a little later joined by Gordon's division. Wharton was moved, together with Wofford's brigade of Kershaw's division, up to the right of the line near Middletown, and the greater part of the artillery supported them. It was now eight o'clock, and the sun had burned off the fog, and a bright, clear, and pleas-

ant autumn day succeeded the foggy morning. The surprise was over, and there was time to think. The Eighth Corps was *hors de combat*; the Nineteenth had done some good fighting, retained its organization, and obeyed its officers, although it had been through a fearful ordeal. It had been attacked in front, flank, and rear, by an enemy who appeared to be everywhere. It had been run over by fugitives; a part of its artillery had been abandoned on the ridge, because the descent was too steep for guns to be got out except by passing in direction of the enemy, and in some cases the limbers could not be got up to the guns on the steep hill. Some portions of the command had made a desperate resistance, and met with severe loss under most depressing circumstances. When the corps re-formed across Meadow Creek, it was with depleted ranks, though not with diminished courage. Even the Sixth Corps, which was further removed from the fugitives and hardly under fire at all, had lost heavily in stragglers. Fortunately at this moment, when a bold push down the pike would have cut Sheridan's army off from its line of retreat and placed it at the mercy of the rebel army, who could have advanced rapidly down that superb road, which was everywhere higher than and commanding the land to the west where our army was, Early's men desisted from the attack; many left the ranks and ran through the camps of the Eighth and Nineteenth Corps, plundering the tents, and upon all came a wonderful change from that energy and courage which had made the march of the night before and the morning's attack upon our army. The

attack was not abandoned, for a lively fight took place between Getty's men and the divisions in front of them. The attack was, however, not vigorously pressed by the enemy, and time was given to what remained of Sheridan's infantry to rally and consolidate; and Torbert, at last finding out the state of affairs, moved Merritt's division across to the pike just north of Middletown, securing that invaluable avenue to our army.

Sheridan's cavalry, about 7,000 strong (except Powell, who was on the river near Front Royal and who held the road all day), was encamped on the extreme right and in rear of the camp of the Sixth Corps. When the morning attack occurred, Custer and Lowell's brigade (which was at first sent to help him, but soon returned to Middletown) confronted the rebel cavalry at the back road, while Merritt's division, with Torbert at the head, came over toward Middletown, and formed in column of regiments, waiting orders.

It was hours, however, before any were received, or before Torbert knew exactly the situation of affairs at the front. My own experience that morning made me a witness of this peculiar fact. When the attack of Gordon became a certainty, Sheridan's headquarters came almost immediately under the fire of the rebels, and tents were struck and packed under a heavy musketry fire. I had at the time a squad of rebel prisoners, awaiting the arrival and departure of the next supply train to be sent down the valley. I think there were altogether about three hundred of them, guarded by the twenty-sixth Massachusetts battalion (the veterans of the old Massachusetts sixth

regiment, which acquired notoriety as being the first regiment to leave the State in 1861, and the first to be fired on at Baltimore). Getting on my horse I went at once to the prisoners' camp (whither I had already sent orders), which lay between the headquarters and the Eighth Corps camp and found them nearly ready to move and in perfect order, although some had been wounded. After dispatching them off by a country road to rendezvous with the headquarters train at the north end of Middletown, I went out towards Crook's corps, to see what could be done in stopping the rout and establishing new lines.

I came soon into a steady stream of fugitives going to the rear across the fields to the west of the pike. All said nothing remained of the corps, and that the rebel cavalry were in Middletown and his infantry in possession of the pike. It was still very foggy, and you could not see far. Although not running, the men poured steadily to the rear, officers and men alike, and no efforts of mine could stop one. I waited until two pieces of artillery came along without an officer, and without caissons. This seemed a chance to do something, so I rode along with the guns to the hill afterwards occupied by the second division, Sixth Corps, where I placed them in battery in an excellent position on the crest of the hill, and looked about for supports. I got a regimental color, about two hundred men, and finally a major; formed a line, and put him in command, expecting great things. I then went after more men to support, and found and brought them back only to find guns, colors, men, and major gone. Seeing it was hopeless

to try, I gave it up, and was going to another part of the field, when Getty's division came along in perfect order and occupied the ground I had chosen. With their provost marshal I posted his guards, and a smart fight began immediately. I then rode into Middletown streets, crossing Meadow Creek, through a cornfield, and found rebel cavalry there, and not a Union soldier in sight on the pike. At this time Early could have pushed down the pike without opposition, and if he had done so, there would have been no retrieving the day for our side. Leaving the town and going towards our right, I soon came upon the cavalry massed. Recognizing me as one of the headquarters staff, General Torbert rode out to meet me, and asked if I brought him orders. I said no, and asked if it were possible he had no orders; and then I learned with astonishment that he neither had received orders, nor did he know fully of the disaster of the early morning. I advised him at once to make haste to seize the pike, and he did so with Merritt's division, and on that line this part of the cavalry fought all the rest of the day, while Custer with the greater part of his force (the rest keeping Rosser in check), operated on the right flank, both fighting Early's infantry.

I now went further over to our right and came to the troops of the Nineteenth Corps, which, after some time holding the rebels in check, had been slowly withdrawn from one position to another, until at this time they occupied the crest of a hill which sloped away gradually to the south to the old camp of the Sixth Corps in the morning. General Emory with his

staff was with his men, and when I came up he was telling them emphatically that he would not retreat any further, that there he would stand and fight; and his men were making breastworks of rails, and even digging a little. I stayed there quite a while, watching his preparations and the advance of the rebels, — Gordon's and Kershaw's divisions, who were slowly and in fine order coming up the slope, their guns throwing solid shot up the hill at Emory's corps. While we were talking, an aid of General Wright rode up and gave General Emory orders to retire. I turned and saw the first division of the Sixth Corps just coming out of a piece of woods in retreat towards the pike, and rode over and had quite a talk with General Wheaton. We discussed the events of the day and the probable results. This division, as well as Emory's corps, was at this time apparently in perfect order, and as quiet as if on a common march. Wheaton marched over obliquely toward the pike, which soon came into view across the fields, and one thing at once struck me as curious, — that the stream of men was now going towards Middletown. Astonished, I left Wheaton and galloped over to the pike, where I learned that Sheridan had just passed up;[†] and directly after meeting General Forsythe, chief of staff, I received orders to go to Newtown, form a guard, and collect all the stragglers I could and bring them up to the front. This I proceeded to do, and finally collected about two thousand men of all corps and brought them up and turned them over to the command of General Crook, then on our extreme left and rear.

[†] As well as can be ascertained, it was half past eleven o'clock.

From the time the Sixth Corps became engaged, at about nine A. M., until Sheridan came up, about noon, the attacks of the enemy were on the whole feeble and ineffective; at times better sustained, but not apparently under any strong general direction. In General Early's account of the fight he says that his men were to a great degree scattered about in our camps engaged in plundering, and that they could not be rallied to their commands, which, thus enfeebled, could not be pushed forward vigorously. Whatever was the reason, they fought with less spirit. For good reasons our ranks were as much diminished as Early's, and more so, and the soldiers looked behind, and longed for some change. All felt the want of generalship, and it was a common remark that they were not whipped, and they wondered why they constantly retreated. The rebels were slowly gaining ground and our men yielding it, with now and then a sharp fight, but generally the fighting was desultory. There was not at the time Sheridan came up, nor had there been at all during the morning, a continuous line of battle formed by General Wright.

When Merritt came upon the pike just to the north of Middletown, he found himself opposed by rebel infantry, Wharton's division and Wofford's brigade, who were posted in a hollow road running nearly at right angles across the pike. Some were in the houses and fired from the windows. Artillery was in position on the edge of the town, and to our left, in woods beyond the town, were Payne's cavalry, who fought dismounted, and never took a very active part in the battle. Merritt held his place here all day with his

division, and entirely unassisted by infantry. The part of Powell's division which had been at the ford on the Front Royal road came in by cross roads and joined Merritt.

After the Sixth Corps became engaged, the enemy extended his line to the west, and formed a line continuously from about one eighth of a mile beyond the pike to the east, to the old camp of the Sixth Corps, and this line was advanced during the morning and until four p. m., until beyond the northerly part of Middletown, at right angles with the pike. This line on both flanks overlapped the line formed by Sheridan. General Sheridan had arrived at Winchester October 18th, from Washington, and passed the night there. Early in the morning the guns were heard, but he at first supposed they were fired by Grover's division, Nineteenth Corps, in making the reconnoissance. Hearing the noise increase, he mounted and hurried up the pike; meeting at Mill Creek the first fugitives, he got the news which sent him flying to Middletown, and inspired the army with new courage. Winchester is fourteen miles from Middletown.

When that general came up and relieved General Wright, the second division of the Sixth Corps was near the pike, facing Early, but to the west the first and third divisions were in retreat, and before Sheridan stopped him, Emory was with his corps considerably in rear of the Sixth Corps. These were promptly brought back, and a line formed parallel to that of Early's army, which was then halted getting ready to attack. Sheridan rode along his line seeing

for himself all his troops, and saying a word or two as he went along to encourage them, to which they responded with cheers. Powell had sent information of the advance of a rebel force from Front Royal, on the Newtown road.¹ Until this was proved to be false, the attack was delayed, otherwise the final battle would have begun sooner in the day. At four o'clock Early's line advanced, anticipating Sheridan's attack. His attack was feeble and was easily repulsed, and in about fifteen minutes afterwards the order to make a counter attack was given. At first it was not successful. But very soon on the right, Dwight's first division, Nineteenth Corps, which, after the repulse of the rebels, was put on the extreme right (it had before been in rear of the second division), attacked, got Kershaw on his front started, and the cavalry and second division followed it up. Gordon's division broke, the panic extended, and a break occurred in Early's line, through which Dwight followed, breaking off the rebels as he went, and when he came out into open ground he found himself far in advance of any of our infantry, and in rear of Early's line. Taking him, from his position, to be the enemy, the Sixth Corps artillery fired into his ranks.

Meadow Creek runs past Middletown, parallel to the pike, and makes quite a ravine, though the land is cultivated; and the plateau on which Middletown lies is by this ravine separated from the wooded hills beyond, where the panicky part of Early's men now

¹ Lomax, commanding a division of rebel cavalry, was ordered by Early to advance from Front Royal and come into the battle on our left flank, but the order failed to reach Lomax, and no advance was made.

were. Defending Middletown were Wharton's and Pegram's divisions and Wofford's brigade, well supported by artillery and a few cavalry. Opposite them on our side were, to the left (east) of the pike, Merritt's and part of Powell's cavalry, and on the west side Getty's division, Sixth Corps. Custer had brought over to the pike part of his command, but Sheridan sent him to the right flank. The fighting about and beyond Middletown was for a while most obstinate. The rebels were behind stone walls in open fields. Our cavalry did not hesitate to charge these troops mounted again and again. The rebels stood manfully, and repulsed all attacks for a while, realizing that all now depended on their holding their ground. Finally, seeing their line broken and in flight on the other part of the field, our troops gaining their rear, and pressed vigorously in front, they yielded, but not in disorder at first. They were bravely led, and yet made several attempts to repel the attacks, but finally, and just about sundown, they broke and joined in the general rout. The rebels had here a large number of guns, but when the collapse came, guns and men seemed to vanish as if they had been swallowed up in the ground. Merritt charged with all his cavalry, but they captured no guns on our side of Cedar Creek. Crossing a little below the bridge, they pursued the enemy up to the foot of Fisher's Hill. Had one half hour more of daylight been left, it is probable that but few of Early's men would have escaped, but knowing the country, and aided by darkness, they broke for the fields and woods, and though our cavalry were miles ahead of them, thousands got away and joined

Early in the lines of Fisher's Hill during the night. Their artillery was captured all along the road, across Cedar Creek, as well as ambulances and wagons in great numbers. It is said that Early himself was at one time in our hands, but escaped in the confusion. Just beyond Strasburg is a small bridge across a brook. The bridge, not more than ten or twelve feet across, had become impassable from the breakage of a plank or two. A wagon was overturned, and by this accident everything on wheels behind this wagon fell into our hands.

Next day our trophies amounted to about 1,200 prisoners, forty-eight cannon, fifty-two caissons, large piles of small arms, and wagons by the score, ambulances, etc., and seven battle-flags. Dwight's division crossed the creek, and advancing to the top of the hill beyond remained there during the night. The rest of the army (except the cavalry) went into their old camps.

This is briefly an account of the events of this wonderful day.

Early's plan of attack, if the credit belongs to him, is certainly deserving of all credit. To prevent Sheridan from detaching part of his force and sending it to Grant, a demonstration had to be made. To attack his victorious army in a strong position with troops that had been repeatedly beaten and lost nearly all their artillery was a task demanding boldness and ingenuity. The plan was worthy the occasion, and the execution of all, up to eight o'clock, as brilliant a feat of arms as the war afforded. But whatever Early could say of his men for deserting their colors to plunder, more could be said of his want of generalship in neglecting

to push down and seize the pike — a most fatal error; but even had he pushed hard in the attack upon our shattered army, which was handled with great want of decision, success would have been sure. It is one of those unaccountable things in war that justify Solomon in saying: "The battle is not to the strong." What finally happened to Early that day is but what every man in the army felt and said all day was sure to happen "if only Phil Sheridan were here!"

The surprise of the morning was complete, and it is no discredit to the men in the camps. The whole situation of the troops on the left flank was inexcusable. Before Sheridan left for Washington a strong force of cavalry had been encamped beyond Crook, but General Wright had placed them, when Sheridan had returned them to him, on the right, and Powell was left so far away as to be no protection. An attack from across the Shenandoah was not a thing to be reasonably anticipated, to be sure; but a proper picketing of the river, and guarding of roads leading to our left flank, would have made the surprise difficult and unlikely to succeed. The fog of the morning added immensely to the success of Gordon's attack, and left the second division of the Eighth Corps in doubt where the attack was to occur. They were consequently taken at fearful disadvantage, and their rout became a necessity. Probably no troops in the world would have done any better, situated as they were. These were the very men who behaved splendidly at Winchester, and who turned Early's flank at Fisher's Hill, and General Crook was a fine officer.

The rout of the Eighth Corps left Emory's flank and rear exposed, and at the same time he received the attack of Wharton in front, aided by powerful artillery. Emory's habit of turning his men out under arms at reveille probably saved his corps this day from the fate of Crook's soldiers. General Emory himself was promptly on the scene and had two horses killed in the first quarter of an hour. Seeing the necessity of getting his men across Meadow Creek before they could be properly rallied, he pushed out the one hundred and fourteenth New York regiment (his headquarters guard), which lost in a moment almost half their number in sacrificing themselves to gain time for the balance of the corps to cross the creek. Although in the confusion the corps lost a large part of its numbers in stragglers, it was steady the balance of the day, always ready for its share of the fighting; and in the final attack of the day, which decided the fate of Early, it was an attack by Dwight's first division which made the beginning of the end.

Of the Sixth Corps Sheridan said in his report that "Getty's division [the second] confronted the enemy from the first attack of the morning until the battle was decided." There was some unsteadiness in the other divisions at times, and all the divisions furnished something towards the stragglers, but the corps was true to its well-earned reputation gained in the Army of the Potomac. By its steadiness near Middletown, early in the day, opportunity for rallying our army was given, and the final success was made possible.

In this battle, as at the battle of Winchester, Torbert's cavalry had to fight infantry in the open fields.

That is to say our cavalry was not protected by woods, and presented a fair mark all day for the rebel musketry and artillery. The rebels themselves were protected by stone-walls and houses, so that no proper opportunity for charging occurred. Feeling that on them depended the holding of the pike, the cavalry pushed in against the rebel infantry under circumstances which made success almost impossible. They charged right up to the stone-walls and close to the rebel guns, and at their head fell that fine officer, Colonel Lowell, of the Second Massachusetts Cavalry, in command of the regular brigade of cavalry. These charges were repeated several times, only to be repulsed. On the right of our infantry was Custer's division. In the early morning he was attacked by Rosser, but found no difficulty in sending him back the way he came. In the afternoon, with part of his command, he came over from the back road, and finally fought on Emory's right, and charged with his cavalry the infantry of Kershaw and Gordon. He crossed the creek near the mouth of Meadow Creek, and pursued Early to Fisher's Hill. It was by his men that most of the captures were made, as they were the first to cross the creek,

In this battle the rebel cavalry had little to say.

It is only justice to say that our army was not handled with ability all the day until Sheridan's arrival. There was an entire lack of combination, a want of grip, a feebleness which came near being fatal. The want of preparation, in view of the circumstances and of General Sheridan's positive orders to prepare for an attack, was most remarkable. Ap-

parently nothing was done but to order the reconnaissance. Early's army was numerically inferior to Sheridan's, no doubt, although it is certain that at four p. m. his infantry line overlapped Sheridan's on both flanks; and that was a single line, too, excepting a part of the Nineteenth Corps, and not a heavy one. In cavalry we were far superior in numbers. Probably one half Sheridan's infantry was at the rear among the stragglers at four p. m. At this time every man in Early's army was a veteran, tried in scores of battles, while in our ranks one third of the men had not served a year, and were certainly not veterans.

Early's account of his forces and their battles is a wonderful story, fully entitled to rank with Münchhausen's.

In referring to his army he speaks of them as so many "muskets." In his own estimates he never makes his forces over one third of ours. You cannot help thinking that possibly one musket was carried by two, three, or four men.

In his "Last Year of the War," he gives his losses at Winchester and Fisher's Hill, together, at less than 4,000 men. I counted at Winchester, the day after the battle, in one squad, 1,806 unwounded prisoners; the wounded captured in Winchester numbered at least 500 (350 in one single place). There were great numbers of his dead unburied on the field, and I received over 1,000 wounded further up the valley, who were wounded in that battle, and removed during the afternoon of the fight. His losses could not possibly have been less than 3,500, and were probably over 4,000.

At Fisher's Hill we captured 1,800 prisoners ; and in the two fights Early certainly lost 6,000, and probably over 7,000, men. From these numbers an estimate of his troops can be easily made. Altogether during the campaign, I had on the Provost Marshal's books record of 7,000 unwounded prisoners, who were soldiers, besides which there were a large number of civil prisoners sent to the rear.

Colonel E. B. Parsons, who succeeded me as Provost Marshal General, in an official communication, puts the actual number of prisoners on the books at 13,000 ; and this from August, 1864, to March, 1865.

Early says he lost "about" 60 pieces of artillery altogether. Our books showed that we captured 101 guns. Deducting 18, which at Cedar Creek were recaptured, after the disaster of the morning, leaves 83 pieces.

He speaks in his book of the "incapacity of his opponent" in one place ; in another, he says that for not utterly annihilating him at Winchester "Sheridan ought to have been cashiered." All through his report of the valley campaign he abuses Sheridan.

Early was himself a good fighter, a general of great energy, and undoubted zeal and courage. He never seemed to know when he was beaten ; but after his defeats, in the language of the prize-ring, he always "came up smiling." For his defeats he lost the confidence of his army and of the Southern people, and finally had to be removed. Since the war he has been implacable in his antagonism to the Union. He will not be reconstructed. During all the contest, perhaps, nobody fought better than he did ; but then nobody else ever got such an awful licking.

The true account of the marches, battles, and privation of that wonderful corps, formerly Jackson's and later Ewell's, needs no embellishing.

Some of his regiments recruited early in 1861 served bravely to the end without being once recruited, notably those from Louisiana. The history of officers and men is alike worthy the admiration and respect of a true soldier. It has been one peculiarity of most of the Southern accounts to belittle their opponents and tell wonderful stories of their own prowess. Harry Gilmor, the renowned freebooter, if you are to believe the half he tells, ought to have defeated our whole cavalry alone; but really his notoriety was gained by plundering sutlers' wagons, and running railroad trains off the track, and robbing the passengers. Even Mosby's men, a much more effective body of troops, were at the best military highwaymen, who never participated in any regular battles. Their leader was at times capable of generosity, but he had a set of officers (some of them deserters from our army) who rivaled the deeds of Captain Kidd. Mosby's battalion numbered in October, 1864, 1,600 men with six guns. Besides him and Gilmor there were other guerrilla bands under McNiel and others. These irregular troops, though nominally regular and under regularly commissioned officers, made the contest a bitter one, and caused Sheridan to detach large forces to watch them and guard the trains from their incursions. Altogether it is probable that Sheridan's army outnumbered Early's two to one; but at Cedar Creek Early had as many men in line at four o'clock P. M. as Sheridan.

But at that hour a man commanded the Union army who never gave up until he was beaten. The sight of him was enough to turn the tide of stragglers, and when he rode along the line of battle before the attack the victory was half won.

Few officers who served in this war but became some time or other witnesses of that dreadful scene — a panic — all who saw one know how completely even brave men become demoralized in consequence. The personality of General Philip H. Sheridan with an army demoralized by panic turned a woful disaster into one of the handsomest victories of the war at Cedar Creek, October 19, 1864.





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